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硕 士 学 位 论 文

A Study on Incoherence in Chinese-English Translations of  
Grade III and Grade IV English-major Students  
英语专业本科高年级学生汉英翻译中  
不连贯现象研究

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## **Abstract**

Coherence is a concept widely discussed in discourse analysis. Different experts have given different definitions. This thesis proposes that coherence should be defined in a broader sense—that the concept of coherence should include both macro and micro perspectives. However, it is impractical to study all the aspects of coherence in this limited thesis. This thesis is confined to the study of micro-incoherence.

In the last ten years, the concept of coherence has been introduced into the field of Translation Studies. It is regarded as a requirement for translations and it is evaluated by the receivers' acceptability.

The coherence of students' translations is not given much attention. Previous studies on their translations mainly discuss cohesion rather than coherence, and most of those studies are qualitative study rather than quantitative ones. Therefore, this thesis conducts an empirical study to investigate the incoherent errors rising in Chinese to English translations of 112 Grade III and Grade IV English-major students. Their incoherent errors are classified into reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, lexical coherence and thematic linkages based on Halliday's Cohesion Theory and Theme-Rheme Theory.

There are four steps to the methodology of this empirical study. The first step is data collection, in which original Chinese passages are compared with their translations produced by English-native speakers and then coherent features are identified. Based on those coherent features, criteria are set up to evaluate students' translations and the results are recorded. The second step is data analysis, in which a combination of qualitative and quantitative method is adopted. A thorough analysis is made to study incoherent errors and their causes. In the third step, a relevant questionnaire is conducted among the same subjects. With the information collected from the questionnaire, the thesis reveals students' psychological process of translation. And finally, based on the above analysis, the thesis answers three research

questions. In addition, two strategies and a teaching method of Peer Group Discussion to reduce incoherent errors are proposed. In order to guarantee the validity of the data, another translation is assigned to the same group of students. They are allowed to discuss the difficulties and work out the translations together with their group members. Their incoherent errors are involved in the analysis as well.

The thesis finds that all the translations are incoherent to some degree. English-major students must pay attention to the incoherence in their translations. The absence of conjunctions and thematic links are their main errors. The thesis attributes these errors to the word-to-word translations, which indicate that students are still poor in terms of language competence. During the translation, students are busy producing “equivalent” words and phrases, but the underlying logical connections and information flow are not perceived. The original Chinese conventions and principles are imposed on English translations, and therefore incoherent errors occur. In addition, seniors do not make fewer errors than juniors in this specific translation. This may confirm that coherence is not given enough attention in translation training.

In order to reduce incoherent errors, the thesis suggests English-major students develop efficient revising skills and increase awareness to eliminate negative transfer from Chinese language. Several specific skills to reduce incoherence are proposed. For example, it is recommended that the demonstrative reference “这” be translated into “it” or “that” in several texts. And syntactic orders should be adjusted and information flow should be rearranged.

**Key Words:** incoherent errors; Chinese to English translations; strategies and skills

## 摘 要

连贯是语篇分析中的重要概念。近年来,它逐渐被引入翻译研究领域。本文在以往连贯概念的基础上,提出广义的连贯概念。本文认为连贯既包括宏观连贯和微观连贯,也包括有形连贯和无形连贯。由于篇幅和精力有限,本文研究局限于分析微观的不连贯现象。

连贯是译文的基本要求,但是其重要性却没有引起英语学习者的重视。目前,我国翻译研究领域对英语专业本科高年级学生汉英译文的研究,衔接居多,连贯尚少;描述性定性分析居多,实证性定量分析尚少。因此,本文通过实证研究,分析 112 名英语专业本科三年级和四年级学生同一篇汉英翻译课堂作业中的不连贯现象。希望找出学生汉英译文中不连贯现象的出现频率、原因以及三年级学生译文与四年级学生译文在连贯方面的区别,并提出改进策略。

研究以韩礼德的衔接理论和主述位理论为基础对英语的连贯现象进行分类。实证研究首先将汉语原文与外国汉学家的译文对比,分析汉语和英语在连贯方面的差异以及母语为英语的译者如何在译文中实现连贯。同时,根据对比分析的结果设置一组针对该篇译文连贯性的评分标准;其次,根据评分标准对学生译文逐个分析评分,记录、整理、并统计数据;再次,对同一受试进行问卷调查,试图了解学生的学习背景和翻译过程中的心理过程;最后,结合数据分析和问卷调查的结果,解释译文中的各种不连贯现象和分析成因。实证研究还收集并分析了 12 份学生课后小组讨论模式下产出的译文,旨在比较在时间充裕、资料齐全的条件下不连贯现象的出现频率是否相同。

研究发现所有的学生译文(包括课后小组讨论模式下产出的译文)都存在不连贯现象,译文连贯质量不容乐观。连接词误用和主述位信息连接中断是主要的不连贯现象,在课堂练习和课后练习译文中出现频率均较高。本文认为这是由学生字对字翻译造成的。在翻译过程中,学生疲于寻找对等的词和短语,而忽略了语篇的内在逻辑关系和信息连接。在此次研究中,四年级学生译文中不连贯错误并未少于三年级学生的错误,这也许说明在汉英翻译训练中不连贯现象并未得到充分重视。但这仅是一篇译文的分析结果,不具有普遍性。在研究分析的基础上,

本文建议英语专业学生应高度重视汉英译文的不连贯问题,并提出在充分了解汉英连贯差异的基础上,通过反复修改译文、提高修改技巧和减少母语负迁移的策略来减少译文的不连贯现象。同时,通过对比汉英两种语言在语义、句型和语篇层次上的异同,本文具体介绍了一些翻译技巧减少不连贯现象。

**关键词:** 不连贯现象; 汉英翻译; 策略和技巧

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## Introduction

Coherence refers to the overall organization and network of discourse, with which sentences are linked intentionally to make a continuity of sense. It is regarded as “one of the most general and most widely discussed concepts” (Redeker, 2000: 233) in discourse analysis. Many scholars have studied this concept from different perspectives such as semantics, pragmatics, and cognition. However, there has been no consensus reached on its definition and its study scope. In recent years, more and more scholars have introduced coherence into Translation Studies, because translation itself is regarded as a piece of discourse.

Coherence is vital for translations to achieve its communicative goal. It is impossible for people to comprehend an incoherent discourse. As a result, coherence is an essential topic in Translation Studies.

Though coherence is of great significance, it is not given enough attention. During the translation, students are struggling to find equivalent language items. A lot of incoherent errors occur in their translations, but those errors are not perceived. Scholars do not pay attention to the incoherence in students' translations either. In the last ten years, there have been 91 out of 565 MA graduated theses discussing the incoherent phenomena in translations. They study incoherence in different styles of English texts including English for science and technology, English poetry, English idioms, English news, medical text, advertisement text, tourist text, and business text. But only a few concern the students' translations.

The quality of English-major (EM) students' translations is important to the communication and development of China. Each year, millions of EM students graduate. After graduation they do the jobs closely related to English language such as English teachers, diplomatic agents, international businessmen, and so on. They are regarded as English professionals and their translations, Chinese to English (C-E) translations in particular, are widely read by the international community. But the

quality of their translations is far from satisfactory.

The improvements in their translation seem to be urgent and crucial. But the nature of improvements is quite difficult for students, especially for the advanced English learners. They can improve their translations by expanding vocabulary and background knowledge. But they may have difficulty in perceiving their incoherence, and know little about the strategies and skills to make improvements. Making improvements in the overall coherence is a challenge for them.

Therefore, this study intends to investigate the incoherent errors made by EM students of Grade III and IV. It analyzes each incoherent error within the theoretic framework of Systemic Functional Principle and figures out the causes. Moreover, it proposes two strategies and several specific skills which probably help to eliminate incoherent errors to some degree.

This thesis is to be divided into three parts as follows:

Chapter One describes the research background of the thesis. It introduces the previous studies on the concept of coherence, the definition of coherence in this thesis and the role of coherence in translations. And Halliday's classification of cohesive devices and thematic links are presented in this chapter as well.

Chapter Two is the main body of the thesis. It mainly discusses the empirical study on incoherent errors in C-E translations of 112 EM students. A relevant questionnaire is conducted among the same group of subjects. Based on the collected data and information, the errors and their causes are investigated. The subjects of this study are found not satisfactorily competent in achieving coherence in their C-E translations. Their errors mainly result from the word-to-word translations.

Chapter Three proposes two strategies, a teaching method and several specific skills to help students reduce incoherent errors in their translations. It compares Chinese with English at different levels, and discusses how to eliminate the incoherent errors with respect to reference, repetition, ellipsis, conjunction, syntactic structure and thematic progression. It complements the analysis in Chapter Two.

## **Chapter One Research Background**

### **1.1 Definition of Coherence**

Coherence is explained as “a reasonable connection or relation between ideas, arguments, statements, etc.” (2008: 345) in *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*. In *Routledge Dictionary of Language and Linguistics*, it is defined as “In general, the grammatical and semantic interconnectedness between sentences that form a text. It is the semantic structure not its formal meaning which creates coherence” (2000: 80).

Coherence is a concept greatly discussed in discourse analysis. Different scholars interpret it from different aspects. But none of their theories can include all the aspects, and no consensus has been researched so far on the definition of coherence. This section is going to review the previous studies on the concept of coherence. Based on that, a new definition will be proposed and the study scope of this thesis will be bounded as well.

#### **1.1.1 Previous Studies on the Concept of Coherence**

The phenomenon of coherence, an important property in discourse, has been attracting the increased interest in the academic research. Early in the 1860s, the rhetorical scholars considered the coherence as one of the conditions for an article to gain unity. Its concept probably begins in Alexander Bain’s first rule of the paragraph: “The bearing of each sentence upon what precedes shall be explicit and unmistakable” (Bamberg, 1983: 417). In the 1960s, Herweg, a German linguist, initiated the study of discourse analysis. He studies the relationships between different types of substitution and coherence. And since the 1970s, the study of coherence has been developing dramatically and been paid intensely attention by scholars of different schools. Scholars have made great efforts to define and explain coherence from different perspectives such as lexical structure, semantics, pragmatics, cognition, receivers, and

logical organization, in both spoken and written discourse.

These perspectives are diverse and sometimes overlap. After reviewing almost all of their theories, this thesis divides their concepts into two categories – the micro-coherence and macro-coherence. Micro-coherence refers to the coherence discussed from the perspectives within the discourse such as lexical structure, semantics and logical organization while macro-coherence includes those perspectives beyond the discourse such as pragmatics, cognition and receivers.

### **1.1.1.1 Micro-coherence**

There are a large number of scholars discussing the concept of coherence in micro-perspectives, such as Halliday, Hasan, van Dijk, and Crystal. It is noted that though their concepts are put into the category of micro-perspectives, macro-perspectives are included in their theoretical systems as well. But the macro-perspectives are secondary.

Halliday and Hasan are the pioneering scholars studying coherence. In their book *Cohesion in English* (1976), they use “texture”, a term they propose referring to coherence.

The overall coherence is achieved by the cohesive ties. They define coherence as “the cohesive harmony of a text”. They spare most of their efforts to specify “cohesive ties”, which are lexical and grammatical relations of structure within the text. They define “cohesion” as “relations of meaning that exist within the text” or “a relationship between two textual elements in which one is interpreted by the other” (Halliday & Hasan, 2001: 4). These semantic cohesive ties within the text constitute a coherent text. In other words, coherence is built on the cohesive ties.

Furthermore, they argue that register consistency is also of significance to a coherent discourse. “The concept of cohesion can be usefully supplemented by that of register, since the two together effectively define a text” (Halliday & Hasan, 2001: 23) and a coherent discourse should meet two standards:

It is coherent with respect to the context of situation and therefore consistent in register;

and it is coherent with respect to itself, and therefore, cohesive. Neither of the two conditions is sufficient without the other, nor does the one by necessity entail the other. Just as one can construct passages which are beautifully cohesive but which fail as texts because they lack consistency of register—there is no continuity of meaning in relation to the situation. (Halliday & Hasan, 2001: 23)

That is the coherence of macro-perspectives, but it is not elaborated further and given full attention. Some scholars misunderstand Halliday and Hasan's concept. They think the definition "fails to take the extra-textual elements into careful consideration" (Wang, 2005: 2). In fact, it is wrong. Halliday and Hasan attempt to discuss coherence from both micro and macro perspectives, but their focus is the cohesive ties, which belong to the semantic coherence or the micro-coherence.

Halliday and Hasan's cohesion theory sets up a foundation for other definitions. But their theory does not further discuss how to choose different cohesive ties in order to produce a continuous discourse. And that is more important for a discourse construction.

Van Dijk, a text linguist, discusses the concept of coherence from semantic and pragmatic perspectives. He initially proposes local and global coherence. The local level of semantic coherence means that semantic relations are "between sentences or between constituents of sentences" (Van Dijk, 1977: 150). They include three aspects: the sequence of facts, the explicitness of facts and the organization of old information and new information. In other words, local coherence indicates the relations exist between sentences, which is similar to Halliday's concept of cohesion. The local coherence is further divided into "conditional coherence" and "functional coherence". The global coherence means overall "macro-structural control", and creates discourse-level coherence. Van Dijk illustrates the difference between local and global coherence in the following example: "I bought this typewriter in New York. New York is a large city in the USA. Large cities often have serious financial problems..." (Bamberg, 1983: 419). Although this text contains lexical cohesive ties—repetitions of "New York" and "large cities"—readers will not consider the discourse as coherent



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